

From Hassan to Mohammed:

A New Era for Morocco

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Brief Analysis

Given its strategic location at the entrance to the Mediterranean basin, Morocco has for decades been seen as an important bulwark for Western interests, first against Soviet and radical Arab influences (especially the National Liberation Front--FLN--in Algeria) and then against Islamist radicalism, which tore Algeria apart. Morocco appeared as an oasis of stability and moderation, a country whose leader understood the requirements of global markets and, as a bonus, Arab-Israeli peacemaking, which he was willing to help facilitate. The challenge for the new king, Mohammed VI, is to sustain this reputation as well as did his father, Hassan II.

The socioeconomic challenges are formidable. Corruption remains rampant; literacy rates are only around 50 percent (mainly because of the appalling 90 percent illiteracy rate among rural women); and unemployment and underemployment together may be as high as 30 percent, and even higher among the youth. Rural areas, with about 45 percent of the population, lack even the most basic necessities. For all of its recent diversification, Morocco's economy is still heavily agricultural, employing 50 percent of the workforce and producing 20 percent of the gross domestic product, making it excessively dependent on the vagaries of annual rainfall. Nevertheless, its economic performance over the last fifteen years has won considerable praise from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and annual population growth rates have been scaled down to about 1.7 percent.

Hassan's Legacy. Hassan II, Morocco's king and "Commander of the Faithful" since 1961, came from the 'Alawi house that has ruled Morocco for 330 years and which claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Hassan's claim to religious as well as temporal legitimacy, his demand for unquestioned fealty from his subjects, and his sometimes brutal repressiveness were fully in keeping with the political tradition of past Moroccan sultans. But Hassan was not merely another Moroccan despot clothed in traditional white robes and accepting loyalty oaths and deferential bows and kisses. He was also a highly sophisticated, urbane, French-educated and -tailed statesman, who understood that his own survival necessitated a deft balancing between tradition and modernity, assisted by Western political and economic support.

Hassan faced many challenges, including, early in his reign, well-entrenched urban political movements and attempted coups d'etat directed by supposedly loyal associates. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, his determination to incorporate Western Sahara into the kingdom risked draining the state coffers and almost turned into a military disaster against the Algerian-backed Polisario independence movement. But Hassan had picked the right cause: restoring the Moroccan Sahara to the motherland, even at great sacrifice, was nearly universally popular, serving as the glue to cement his rule. Moreover, he won crucial military and financial backing from France, the United States, and Saudi Arabia.

Hassan's most important gift to his son in the last decade of his life was a process of controlled political liberalization. This process ended some of the regime's worst human rights abuses; increased the degree of press freedom; and widened the democratic space available for Moroccan political parties, labor unions, women's rights groups, and other civil society manifestations. In early 1998, King Hassan appointed as prime minister 'Abd al-

Rahman Yousouffi, an aging socialist and long-time political opponent of the king. Hassan had achieved his goal of maintaining stability while forging a broad political consensus around the need for the alternation of power between competing political blocs.

Morocco's opposition political parties agreed to assume a share of power in order to hasten social and political reform. Hassan, for his part, saw alternation of power as a way to broaden the base of public support for the existing order and to maintain stability. The two views are compatible only as long as the populace's expectations for improvement are met. In this regard, the first eighteen months of the Yousouffi government have provided few tangible results, as the government found it difficult to find new sources of funding to address social needs. Disaffected urban Moroccans might turn in greater numbers to Islamist movements, one of which already sits in parliament and another of which dominates university student organizations.

Foreign Policy. The 1995 partnership agreement with the European Union (EU) was a milestone in Morocco's relations with its European neighbors which, led by France and Spain, are the primary markets for Moroccan goods and home to 1.5 million Moroccan workers. EU leaders and Morocco are of one mind regarding the need to promote economic development to stave off Europe's nightmare scenario of a massive influx of "boat people" fleeing economic distress and political upheaval. The United States shares this thinking as well, and both Rabat and Washington have shown interest in deepening bilateral economic ties.

Of more immediate concern is the United Nations-sponsored referendum process to determine the juridical fate of Western Sahara. Now scheduled to be held in March 2000, Morocco will only go through with the referendum if it can guarantee the results--that is, incorporation into the kingdom. At the same time, Morocco very much wants to achieve international legitimization of its rule--hence its continuing engagement with UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and his representatives, despite the ups and downs of the process. In any case, Western Sahara is the responsibility of long-time regime strongman Interior Minister Driss Basri. Whether or not his powers will eventually be curtailed by the young king, he is deemed indispensable for ensuring the proper outcome of the issue.

On a related note is the question of relations with Algeria, Morocco's long-time geopolitical and ideological rival for primacy in North Africa. Since 1994, relations have been tense and their common land border has been closed. Algeria remains committed to its Polisario protg in Western Sahara, at least to ensure it every opportunity to win in the referendum. Mutual suspicions abound regarding alleged support for each other's Islamist movements. At the same time, both countries have been careful to ensure that their animosities do not deteriorate into a shooting war. Algeria's newly elected president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, attended Hassan's funeral, portending a possible thaw in the relationship.

Regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process, the king's role as a diplomatic intermediary is probably no longer required. But Morocco can and probably will seek to renew its active role in the multilateral track of the peace process, which is likely to be reinvigorated in the coming months and years. For the new king, participation in such activities will help enhance his own status.

Prospects. Although Morocco has a strong regime with a history of relative political stability, the ultimate source of authority is now in the hands of an untested and inexperienced 36-year-old newly crowned king. No vacuum of authority exists, but neither is Mohammed VI's time to grow into the job unlimited. Palace affairs, particularly his relationship with his younger brother, Prince Moulay Rashid, will also be of significance. To be a successful monarch, Mohammed VI will need to discover his own sources of legitimacy and not just rely on his inheritance. A weak king, during whose reign Morocco stagnates under the authority of existing bureaucratic and financial oligarchies, will breed disappointment among his subjects. On the other hand, the fervent hope among liberal Moroccans that the new king will lead Morocco in the direction of a Spanish-style constitutional monarchy seems premature at best, and a pipe dream at worst. The best to be hoped for, and a possibility that is not out of reach, is a

middle path of continued primacy of the monarchy and accelerated economic development that provides benefits for broader sectors of the population, accompanied by further institutionalization of the rule of law and expansion of individual freedoms and political pluralism.

Spain may be an unreachable model, but Algeria of the 1990s is an ever-present reminder to Morocco and its Western allies of what can go wrong if one plays with fire. This too will work to the new king's advantage as he seeks to establish himself.

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